HOUSTON, TEX.
POST
OCT 5 1969
M - 289,385
S - 328,763

Reading other people's mail

THE SUPER SPIES, by Andrew Tully, 256 pp. New York: Morrow. $5.95.

This book is sure to make waves on the Potomac, either because it is true ("X-988, who told him this?") or because it is not ("Lies, all lies, Mr Secretary.")

In any event, Andrew Tully's latest look at the sprawling, expensive, often dull and sometimes disastrously erroneous spy system now owned and operated by the U.S. makes for intriguing reading.

It also raises a major but little discussed point: Is our intelligence gathering network too big, too expensive, and too powerful? Where does it stop feeding our leaders the facts and start making and carrying out policy, as in the Bay of Pigs?

THE SPY SHOPS are virtually outside Congressional scrutiny, not that Congress has shown any sign of finding out where the $4 billion goes each year, or of determining if our agents lead rather than inform.

Although Secretary of War Henry Stimson once scrapped the nation's fledging intelligence program with the edict: "Gentlemen don't read other people's mail," our government now employes some 60,000 persons to read other people's mail, eavesdrop on other people's conversations, and — as the recent Green Beret case indicates — slit other people's throats.

THE NATION'S intelligence community includes the well publicized Central Intelligence Agency; the Defense Intelligence Agency, the brainchild of Robert McNamara; the spooks of the three military services, although the term "military intelligence" sometimes appears self contradictory; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research; and the biggest of them all, the National Security Agency.

Tully points out that the assorted collection, far from acting as a well organized team, is often at odds, tripping over each others cloaks and daggers in an almost comic display of disarray.

On the other hand, our spooks have often served us well. President Johnson, Tully reports, knew about the 1967 Middle East War beforehand, but reached a hands-off agreement with the Kremlin.

Tully also says that Washington had advance word of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, but was so bogged down in Vietnam that it could do nothing to stop the Russians.

THE AUTHOR reports that our agents knew more about certain Soviet space experiments than did the Russians, and that many of those flying saucer stories were not invented — they were actually wayward Soviet spy satellites.

He goes into the world of modern espionage with its satellites, computers, U-2's and gadgets undreamed of by the fans of James Bond.

Still, there is no substitute for one of Our Boys being in the right place at the right time, like the Chinese-American Annapolis graduate who made his way to Peking by sub and rubber boat. There is still a place in the black art for false papers, bribes, murder, and even carrier pigeons. Tully recounts all of this, with particular emphasis on the National Security Agency, which has about twice the budget and personnel as the CIA.

The NSA has the primary job of drawing up new secret codes for the U.S. while breaking those of every other nation. The agency has computers, mathematicians, scientists — and defectors.

THE TROUBLE with a book such as this is that there is no way to check the facts, no one to confirm or deny Tully's charges.

In an effort to separate the truth from the fiction, I questioned a relative of mine, the family spook, who, in the jargon of the trade, I shall simply call Cousin Che.

He declared that Tully's earlier book, "CIA: The Inside Story," contained many errors, and that since publication of "The Super Spies" there had been some changes in Washington personnel.

As to the other questions, Cousin Che would just answer "Yes" or "No." But if he said "Yes" he probably meant "No." Or did he know that's what I thought, so he said "Yes" when he meant "Yes," or did he know that I knew that he knew that . . .

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